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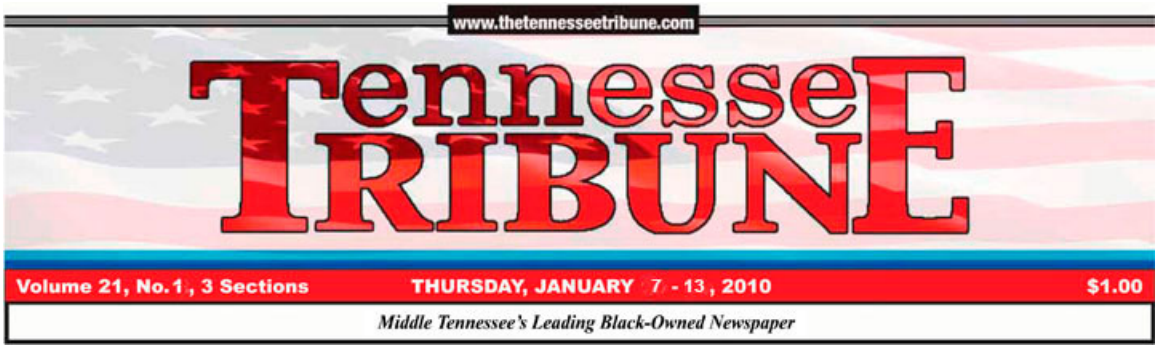

People on an Escalator Share a Dream

by Len Bernstein

I was stirred deeply by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1963 when I, a 13-year-old Jewish boy in Brooklyn, saw his televised speech at the March on Washington, where he said:

> [W]hen we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

As years went on, I came to see that the passionate justice which stirred me and millions of others, had to do with the art I care for so much: photography.

In 1975, as a young photographer, I began to study Aesthetic Realism, and learned that every instance of beauty in art—from stirring prose to a good photograph—can teach us how the world and people deserve to be seen. Eli Siegel, the founder of this great philosophy, stated, "All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves." I love this principle because it shows that beauty is as real and as practical as the pavement we walk on, and that we not only want to be like art—we can be!

In 1983, when I heard plans for the March on Washington for Jobs, Peace, and Freedom celebrating the twentieth anniversary of Dr. King's immortal "I Have A Dream" speech, I was eager to go. I knew it would be historic, and I wanted to be fair to it as a photographer. And so, I went for advice to Nancy Starrels, whose photography class, The Honoring Eye, I attended at the Aesthetic Realism Foundation in New York City. She advised me to think as deeply as I could about the meaning of that day, and how I could

give it form in a single photograph. This helped to clarify my thought—about the history of racism itself, and how black and white people can both hope for and despair of change. I learned, too, that photography makes sense of these opposites: hope and despair, light and dark, sameness and difference. My emotion about the meaning of the march grew as I thought of how the oneness of opposites in the art of photography has the answer to what plagues people.

What I saw in Washington made a lasting impression on me. I saw people of different races and faiths, young and old, well-to-do and poor, marching together in behalf of an America just to all people. I witnessed many things that moved me. However, there was one scene that I'll remember all my life—marchers on an escalator, returning home, all joined together as they rose from the darkness below to the radiant brightness above. This was the picture I was looking for!

Later, I better understood what had affected me as I studied Eli Siegel's historic broadside of 1955, *Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?*, with these questions about sameness and difference:

> "Does every work of art show the kinship to be found in objects and all realities?—and at the same time the subtle and tremendous difference, the drama of otherness, that one can find among the things of the world?"

When I made this photograph I was thrilled by the contrast of light and dark in the scene and the people and how, at the same time, they mingled with one another, added to each other. With all their difference, light and dark do not fight. There is "kinship" as people seem to merge in the dark. Then, as light outlines a hand on a railing, the gentle slope of a shoulder, the profile of a face, we see in these unique, individual forms, "the drama of otherness." As we look at these men and women, can we tell who is white and who is black? They are all "God's children."

Prejudice begins, Aesthetic Realism explains, with the desire in people to have contempt, "to think we will be for ourselves by making less of the outside world." It is the feeling, "They are all the same, but I'm different, more sensitive, superior—and I have a right to deal with them any way I please." This ugly attitude takes thousands of ordinary forms. For example, as my family sat around the kitchen table in Brooklyn and talked about people, it was often with a sense of superiority. We summed them up, and saw neighbors, co-workers, schoolmates, as having shortcomings that made them inferior to us. We saw each other that way, too. We had no idea that our imagined superiority was the reason we argued with one another and why we each felt lonely and empty. Contempt accumulates over time, and carried far enough, makes for every injustice, including racism.

The idea that we can be more complete through welcoming the difference of others has resonated with people for a very long time. Yet, how can intolerance and racism finally be overcome? Ellen Reiss, Aesthetic Realism Chairman of Education, writes in an issue of the international periodical *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known*,

> "[R]acism won't be effectively done away with unless it is replaced with something that has terrific power. What needs to replace it is not the feeling that the difference of another person is somehow tolerable. What is necessary is the seeing and feeling that the relation of sameness and difference between ourselves and that other person is *beautiful*."

Aesthetic Realism taught me that opposites don't have to fight, that every instance of art shows how deeply friendly they can be, and within this is the just way of seeing people that will end racism forever. For instance, dark and light in a photograph don't tolerate each other. They need each other and bring out good possibilities in each other. Here, light brings out the uniqueness of people in the dark below, while it is darkness that makes it gradually possible for us to see the people as they meet the sky. And there's humor as little round pieces of metal in the center, with their own light and dark, are marching upward along with the riders on either side.

The upward tilt of the camera with its 35mm wide-angle lens causes the two escalators to converge. This brings people on opposite sides closer as they reach the top, where heavy concrete walls expand outward and dissolve in the light. I felt all these people were going toward a brighter, kinder world—a world I passionately believe Aesthetic Realism can make a reality. I tried to show that feeling in my photograph.

Note: Len Bernstein is a photographer and educator whose images are in many private and museum collections, as well as the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, and Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. His book, *Photography, Life, and the Opposites*, with a foreword by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Dr. Robert Coles, was a labor of love in which he tried to present the essence of what he has learned and loved for over four decades studying Aesthetic Realism.